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Mueggenberg, Brent. *The Czecho-Slovak Struggle for Independence, 1914-1920*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014. Pp. 322, maps, illus.

Brent Mueggenberg's *The Czecho-Slovak Struggle for Independence 1914-1920* sets out to present 'a revealing and modern view of the personalities and events that contributed to the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic' (p. 4). The result is an engaging narrative, part political history and part *Boy's Own* adventure, which synthesizes existing English-language accounts of the three distinct aspects -- political, military and propagandistic --, which contributed to the founding of the Czechoslovak state. The work is illustrated with splendid photographs, and includes some helpful maps. It does not draw on unpublished, manuscript, Czech-language or Slovak-language sources.

The story that Mueggenberg tells is a fascinating, if complicated, one. It begins with a crucial turning-point in the eventual founding of the Czechoslovak state: the moment, in May 1918, when Czecho-Slovak troops, some 3,000 strong, marched into Chelyabinsk in Siberia, and 'effectively took control of the streets' (p. 12). This convinced Leon Trotsky (then Commissar of War), and subsequently also the French, British and US allied governments, that Czech troops (only later brought under T.G. Masaryk's control and later still dubbed the 'Czecho-Slovak Legions') were in a position to challenge the Bolsheviks. The fact that two wartime Czech exiles -- T.G. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, later Czechoslovakia's first and second presidents -- could claim to war-weary Allies that they had troops in Siberia (ones that could potentially crush the Bolsheviks or reinforce French troops at the Western Front) gave them a vital bargaining chip. Crucially, this enabled them to win recognitions from the Allies and press for Czecho-Slovak rewards at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Success in Paris, in turn, gave the Masaryk-Beneš team credibility with politicians at home in Bohemia who had been agitating for greater regional autonomy within the Habsburg monarchy, but were now unexpectedly presented with the option of independence.

Mueggenberg rightly observes that 'like any subject charged with emotional and political controversy, the Czecho-Slovak struggle for independence, from its inception to its outcome, has been partly enshrouded in myths'. (pp. 14-15). Where he is in a position to do so, he does not shrink

from correcting nationalist distortions and propaganda. He quite properly notes, for example, that although it is widely claimed that the ‘Legions’ arose from Czechs and Slovaks openly vowing ‘to each other not to fire on the Russians and Serbs and to surrender at the first opportunity’, specialist studies reveal that ‘no single ethnic group was responsible... the problem encompassed the entire army and every nationality’ (p. 69).

Elsewhere, however, Mueggenberg’s inability to read Czech and Slovak-language sources has left him more vulnerable to propaganda. Although he cites Andrea Orzoff’s sharply revisionist *The Battle for the Castle* (Oxford, 2009), and acknowledges the disjunction between Masaryk’s stated ideals and actual practices before and after the First World War (pp. 213; 270), Mueggenberg does not seem to realise quite how early Masaryk showed this pragmatism; or how artfully Czech(oslovak) national myths were circulated by the new state’s founding fathers. His account of Dürich’s demise, for example, which enabled Masaryk to seize control of the Legions, is based almost entirely on the testimony of his victorious rivals (pp. 74-81); ‘Catholic clergy’ and ‘anti-Semites’ are treated as if interchangeable expressions; and the crucially different terms ‘Czech’ (referring to a linguistic group) and ‘Bohemian’ (referring to a geographic territory) sometimes overlooked. Most seriously of all, the Slovaks, dismissed as ‘downtrodden peasants of Upper Hungary’ (p. 204), are scarcely mentioned despite the fact that Slovaks – or, to be more specific, Slovak-Americans – were a far more important engine of change than émigré Czechs until at least 1917. Unable to consult the unpublished Masaryk-Beneš papers at the *Masarykův ústav* in Prague, Mueggenberg does not spot the master propagandists’ gradual conflation of ‘Bohemian’ with ‘Czech’; ‘Czech’ with ‘Czecho-Slovak’; and, finally, ‘Czecho-Slovak’ with ‘Czechoslovak’.

‘The Czechoslovak revolutionaries’, as Mueggenberg reminds us, ‘were not first-rate politicians, experienced diplomats or vaunted commanders’. Yet they ‘successfully synchronized a complex political, diplomatic and military campaign to achieve their goal.’ (p. 277). Only a dull reader could fail to be stirred by the tale of how, against all odds, a Czechoslovak state was brought into being; and Mueggenberg tells the story with verve and skill.

Mueggenberg's *The Czecho-Slovak Struggle for Independence, 1914-1920* offers a clear, lively and thoughtful introduction to a fiendishly complicated topic. As well as telling a rattling good yarn, Mueggenberg's study of Czechoslovak independence offers a timely reminder that modern states owe their existence to propaganda and diplomacy as much as to military endeavour and political agitation.

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(750 words)

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